

BOOK REVIEW
Diana Lary
*China's Grandmothers:
Gender, Family, and Ageing from Late Qing
to Twenty-First Century*
(Cambridge University Press, 2022)

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For a long time, narratives of modern China tended to revolve around the nation's youth—their sorrows and ambitions, struggles and setbacks. More often than not, the elderly population, especially older women, were either rendered invisible or as impediments to a presumed rightful progression of modern China.¹ Elderly Chinese have begun to receive more systematic attention from researchers and policy makers in recent years as the side effects of the One-Child policy and the so-called economic miracle became more salient and permanent.² Still, in the shadow of impending demographic and care crises, China's elderly were often cast as a threatening social burden that weighed down the nation's future. Taking issue with the underlying social devaluation of aging and older people, Diana Lary's *China's Grandmothers* addresses this bias by bringing age and gender into focus. This unconventional monograph offers a sympathetic and longitudinal account of Chinese families and elderly women as they weathered the tumult and upheavals of the past two centuries. Lary makes a compelling case that it was in fact China's grandmas who have been bearing, and increasingly so, the weight of the country's adventures and misadventures. To China's grandmas, and to grandmas around the world, Lary pays tribute.

This deeply personal book is at once an insightful historical survey and an intimate memoir. In her search of China's grandmas, Lary not only makes substantial use of personal and fictional accounts of the grandmother figure by Chinese authors but also mobilizes her own family history and her personal knowledge as a veteran China observer. The fourteen chapters are organized following the rhythm of life

and along thematic and chronological lines. The introduction and first chapter provide an overview of the scope and major findings of the book. The body chapters cover subjects such as representations of grandmothers in Chinese classics and personal writings, the status of older women within the family, child care and intergenerational bonds, the grandparents' gendered work, leisure, tastes, and daily routines, grandmothers and Chinese families in times of war, revolution, and migration, as well as old-age care and death care. The last two chapters respectively look into the future of China's grandmothers and Lary's own experiences and family history. Additionally, the chapters are enriched with a variety of engaging features, such as boxed fun facts, images, and thoughtfully-reappropriated idioms and ancient sayings in classical Chinese characters. Citations and historiographical notes are kept to a minimum. Comparative analysis, whether between cultures or concerning changes and continuities over time, is carried out throughout the chapters. The latter gives most of the chapters an underlying chronological order.

A particularly well-developed theme concerns the grandmother's evolving status over the long twentieth century as socioeconomic and political changes eroded the power of the elderly while reinforcing the family as the primary site of childcare. Lary locates the golden age of grandmother-hood in the eighteenth-century Confucian family, when becoming a grandmother in "traditional China" signified a distinct and desirable stage, relationship, and mental state for older women. As Lary explains, from an institutional and

ideological perspective, the late imperial cult of filial piety and cult of patrilineal multi-generational family welcomed the grandmother into the ranks of the patriarch and gave her the “backing of tradition” (35). Embodying the system’s fairness and attraction, the grandmother-matriarch commanded an “automatic position of dominance” in their families (50). This dominance not only meant her promotion to managerial positions and having daughters-in-law to order around, as earlier scholarship has made clear, but also rewarded the older woman a higher degree of emotional freedom. Unlike the dutiful, obedient, and serious stage of motherhood, Lary notes that when becoming a grandmother, the woman earned her right to love, to indulge, to relax, and to be playful. This grandmother glow crystalized in her relationship with the grandchild, who became in many ways a highly personal reward she arranged for herself. Lary documents in great detail the depth of a Chinese grandmother’s passion and involvement in seeking and caring for her favorite grandchildren, which they could finally do without fearing the agony of childbirth themselves. Lary also emphasizes the gentle and permissive affection that distinguished grandmotherly love from the strict disciplinary role expected of the Confucian parents (chapters 3-4). Lary shows that memories of the warm and understanding love of grandmothers abounded Chinese autobiographical and personal writings. These overwhelmingly favorable accounts of the grandmother attested to the intensity of the intergenerational bond between the grandchild and the grandma. And they perhaps also indicated a great degree of culturally-legitimate freedom on the part of the grandchild to openly reciprocate affection and admiration. One wonders, however, within the given generic and moral confines, to what extent the grandchild felt comfortable to share the less sanguine views of the grandmother, should they have any.

The privilege of shedding Confucian formality and enjoying a degree of love for love’s sake in her role as the grandma, however, was not available to all those having a grandchild. As Lary reminds, until recently this privilege belonged almost exclusively to the paternal grandmother or the main-wife-turned-paternal-grandmother if polygamous marriages were involved. According to Lary, it was not until the 1950s that maternal grandmas started to attain an

equal footing with paternal grandmothers. This “major innovation,” however, was driven less by a desire to democratize grandma-hood but more by industrialization and socialist experiments (51). The latter pressed a surging demand on the younger woman for her productive labor and undivided attention. As Lary shows compellingly in chapters four and six, the rise of the maternal grandma coincided with the accelerating erosion of official backing for the old and elderly. This process started in the Republican era, which gradually chipped away at the prestige and wide range of power and liberty once enjoyed by the Confucian grandma, increasingly reducing her role to labor-intensive caregiver. Given that the welfare state and public childcare remained far from a reality in both the Republican and Mao era, childcare by and large remained a private matter provisioned by the family itself. In this context, the grandmother increasingly became the primary childcare source in the family, especially during the turbulent Mao era (63-70). When waves of political campaigns constantly drew younger adults away from home, sometimes for an unpredictable duration of time, grandmothers stood in for the absent parents, looking after the swelling league of baby-boomers of the Mao era. Their contribution to the survival of the family and the socialist regime was indispensable and indisputable, as Lary convincingly demonstrates. But their service has largely gone unacknowledged and uncelebrated by the state. Ironically, while official and public discourses dismissed grandmother care as an inferior makeshift, they increasingly encouraged childcare to be routinized as a grandmother’s natural duty (65-66, 100-101, 135).

Meanwhile, Lary notes that the parenting roles that grandmas became increasingly accustomed to also resulted from modern China’s unpredictable historical circumstances and the family’s faith in her ability and commitment (chapter 9). Lary outlines a variety of precedents and scenarios of parental absence across the twentieth century that required individual families to adapt and improvise. Lary shares ample examples and anecdotes from memoirs and personal writings authored by the offspring of a wide spectrum of Chinese reformers, revolutionaries, and cultural figures active in the twentieth century. She shows that the grandmother frequently undertook crucial surrogate parenting roles when

political persecution, civil conflicts, and dislocation caused by the Sino-Japanese War dispersed families and separated the adult children from the less mobile members of the family—namely, the elderly and the very young. In many of these scenarios, the grandmother functioned not only as the sole care-taker of the young children left behind. She also struggled with straitened circumstances, lack of elderly care, and a sense of abandonment herself. Families continued to resort to this preexisting survival strategy in the Mao and early Reform eras, entrusting grandchildren's daily needs to their paternal and/or maternal grandmothers when the parents were put in labor camps, sent to the borderlands, went missing, or left for work or study. Lary's discussion of the resilience of grandmothers during the Cultural Revolution and their relationships with their fanatic teenager grandchildren is particularly interesting (148-9). By foregrounding unconventional heroines such as elderly women in pivotal historical moments that are usually associated with youth action, Lary sheds refreshing new light on familiar events.

It is against this rich historical backdrop that Lary turns to the new wave of left-behind children and left-behind elderly produced by the peculiar forces of the Reform era (chapter 10). These phenomena have drawn considerable domestic and international attention in recent years. Lary provides an up-to-date overview and informative critique of the mechanisms that cut off more than a third of China's rural children, along with their grandparents, from the family's middling generation sojourning in coastal factory towns. With this case study, Lary not only calls for further attention to these urgent social issues but also provides a vantage point from which the condition of the elderly in contemporary China could be assessed in relation to their counterparts in previous decades and centuries.

Although Lary does not state it as explicitly as one would wish, her findings suggest that contemporary China's "economic miracles" have deepened the inequalities between urban and rural elderly, making it difficult to discuss aging and grandparenting as a whole without foregrounding regional and class differences. On one end of the spectrum of diverging aging experience, many of the rural elderly in contemporary China, especially elderly women,

appear to have been living on a downward trajectory. As Lary explains, the new wealth of the Reform era hinges in many ways on the denial to migrant laborers and their families of permanent urban residency and the welfare and public services associated with it. As a consequence, rural elderly in the Reform era have had to meet the growing care gap exacerbated by the retreat of the state and the routinized absence of their adult children. They have little power to decline their children's requests because, without adequate pensions, they are dependent on their migrant children for old-age support (162). The "pensions" sponsored by their children are conditional. The elderly must earn their "pensions" by providing long-term care for their grandchildren. In other words, merely invoking filial piety or completing parental care for their own children is no longer sufficient to secure old-age support. Lacking financial means, such elderly also rarely can afford to outsource part of the hands-on childcare to commercial alternatives, unlike their urban middle-class counterparts. Despite their advanced age, as Lary reminds, many grandparents work fifty weeks per year as the sole care-takers of their grandchildren. And sometimes one or two elderly people have to tend to multiple grandkids left by different adult children (162-4). Unable to catch their breath after the strenuous labor and caregiving that the Mao era required of them, they have found themselves on another long march. The transition from the cult of Mao to the cult of money, as Lary suggests, has thus brought limited improvements and many demands to rural elderly.

In contrast, on the other end of the spectrum, life appears to have become markedly better for middle-class and affluent Chinese retirees in the city, especially elderly men with state pensions. They tend to have more financial autonomy and leverage when it comes to negotiating intergenerational relations (104-106, 164). They have fewer grandchildren to look after, and their middle-class children are more likely to be present and self-sufficient. Many of these retirees also have affordable urban housing allocated by their work units during the early Reform era, which are now worth millions. As Lary points out, although contributing to the care of grandchildren has become an obligation almost universally expected of grandparents in China today, for those with means, the care does not have to be constant or

always hands-on (70). Lary writes substantially on the pleasures and self-care pursued by grandmothers and grandfathers in contemporary China (esp. in chapters 7 and 11). The ability to enjoy rather than merely endure aging and grandparenting seems to have again become a major source of pleasure, pride, and status. Although Lary maintains that life has “never been all gloom” for the elderly who “knew/know how to enjoy themselves (172),” to “enjoy” many of the old-age pastimes that Lary lists, from practicing calligraphy to tourism, would require considerable privilege. They seem to be more applicable to elite elderly in the past and the urban middle-class at present. One wonders how the exhausted rural elderly or impoverished urban grannies have enjoyed themselves in contemporary China despite their lack of leisure and financial means and how they have viewed their better-to-do counterparts and vice versa. And how did the pattern of elderly consumption reflect, reinforce, or resist class formation and inequality in China today?

Delivering simultaneously a specialized study, a personal history, and a general survey can be daunting. It presents opportunities, as well as challenges. On the bright side, Lary's choice to combine substantial personal experiences and reflections with historical research and scholarly writing is thought-provoking. For example, the memoirs that Lary employs were predominantly accounts *about* the elderly generation rather than first-hand elderly reflections on their own old age. While a thankful grandchild's memories about his or her grandma are informative, they are best at revealing the interests and perspectives of a young person as he or she looked up to a loving elder. It is difficult to imagine that many young grandchildren would have in-depth conversations with their grandmas about her desires and sex life, her views on death and aging, or her deep regrets and dissatisfaction. Such conversations would help reveal the complex inner thoughts, worldviews, and subjecthood of the aged. But they were more likely to occur among elderly confidants and between the aged and her imagined readers. Lary has creatively compensated for the want of colorful and self-reflective elderly Chinese voices with a series of personal notes of her own. She looks back on how she and her grandmothers, who had no Chinese ancestry, experienced aging, grandparenting, and

intergenerational relationships (chapter 14). Organized in parallel to the flow of the book's a dozen or so chapters, these personal notes highlight Lary's own joy and pride for being a granddaughter and later a grandmother, as well as her paternal and maternal grandmothers' diverging lives, personalities, and grandparenting styles. Full of individuality, self-awareness, and humor, these vivid personal narratives make the idea of grandmothering concrete and relatable. Most importantly, their presence testifies to what can be further uncovered in the future.

As to the downsides, simultaneously juggling personal identities/experiences and the professional task of the historian can be challenging. Sweeping generalizations tend to obscure which role the author is adopting. For example, Lary describes how Chinese grandmothers, unlike their Western counterparts, “have always understood that their first duty is to their family” (17); and “Grandmothers were/are baby worshippers, a universal form of adoration particular to older women (43).” For academic readers, such statements are perhaps too assertive. But if read as lyrical expressions and a form of emphasis, they appear less absolute. It is thus important to keep in mind this book's experimental nature and refrain from reading too literally some of Lary's statements.

In terms of objectives and methodologies, it is clear that Lary values the importance of celebrating grandmothers' achievements, documenting their everyday life, and acknowledging their steadfast love and sacrifices. She strives to highlight the shared characteristics and experiences that unite grandmothers of all classes, times, and cultures into a class of their own. This approach is necessary and valuable for making elderly women visible. But it may be less helpful for explaining the inequalities and divisions within the elderly sisterhood or the agency of individuals in shaping and contesting the norms of grandmother-hood. To capture the diverse visions and conditions of elderly life, it may be useful for future research to adopt a more explicit and systematic intersectional approach that situates categories such as class, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability in tandem with age and gender.

It may also be productive to highlight the chaos, deviation, and mischief underlying the more lauded versions of grandmother-hood. A growing number of young people in contemporary China, for example, are forgoing marriage, cisgender conventions, and/or parenthood. One wonders how grandchild-less elderly have coped with these realities and whether they viewed old age without grandparenthood as a grave failure. Meanwhile, like seniors elsewhere, grey divorce and marital separation have become increasingly common in China today. Many older people enthusiastically sought love, sex, and/or companionship, which not infrequently resulted in cohabitation and other fluid relationships rather than formal (re)marriage. Contrary to the image of the ascetic and retreating elderly, their passions and behaviors could appear even more avant-garde and irreverent than those of the younger generations.³ One wonders how these complicated relationships and blended families worked out their intergenerational relationships, and how they were gender- and class-inflected. Additionally, placing ethnicity, race, and nationality at the center of inquiry, one wonders how, for instance, Uyghur grandmothers coped with the mass detention and persecution organized by the Han Chinese state, and how they and other ethnic minorities responded to the most visible, commercialized, and politically correct Han urban middle-class model of domesticity.

We will find even more intriguing “irregularities,” should we banish the fantasy that all happy families and all meaningful old lives resemble one another. An area that particularly deserves further research is the question of the elderly’s, especially elderly women’s, gendered political agency, political expression, and their capacity for collective action. The elderly in China as a whole, as Lary suggests on several occasions, tend/tended to be politically aloof and immune to ideologies and idealistic causes (149). She posits that “there has been no surge of ‘grey power’ in China” and she dates the last major episode of grey power to the Falungong protest in 1999 (199). But Lary also notes elsewhere that elderly women could be so recalcitrant and their labor so indispensable that even the overzealous Mao-era Party had to “leave them alone” (135). Capable of being “unintentional subversive,” as Lary puts it, even in the Mao era grandmas continued to

gossip, spread rumors, pass down officially-condemned dialects and folk traditions to their grandchildren (139-140). Have the elderly in China today really become the gentle, considerate, self-effacing, and passively smiling creatures that the Party hoped to produce? Has the arrival of old age so decisively driven the elderly toward domestic pleasures and otherworldly pursuits alone, regardless of their circumstances, earlier political engagement, and age-blessed courage and wisdom?

A case in point is the activism of the retired Chinese gynecologist and AIDS campaigner Gao Yaojie (b. 1927), whose recollections of her grandmother appear in Lary’s book (40). It is worth remembering that Gao Yaojie herself is also a grandmother, as well as an activist. Gao’s retirement, advanced age, bound feet, and high political pressure did not stop her from standing up for the tens of thousands of AIDS victims, including the orphaned children and left-behind elderly, in Central China and beyond. Although she was forced to leave China and her entire family behind in her eighties, her image as a compassionate, unwavering granny has inspired millions of admirers inside China and around the world.⁴ Gao’s political (re)awakening in her old age and dual identity as a grandma activist are not exceptional. The political engagement of the retired Chinese academic Ai Xiaoming (b. 1953), whose feminist stance and passion for social justice only grew with aging and by embracing aging, is equally notable. Ai stunned the nation in 2013, for instance, by baring her aged breasts for a naked plea against sexual abuse of minors and judicial cover-ups. She also reinvented herself as an independent filmmaker in her fifties. Her more than two dozen documentaries have borne witness to the fighting spirit of Chinese activists and marginalized people in the past two decades.⁵ Political engagement is not a privilege exclusive to aged professionals. Elderly peasant women have also openly quested justice. It is noteworthy, for instance, that grandmothers in Huashui, Zhejiang stood at the frontline of the local protests against chemical pollution and official suppression.⁶ These are but a few examples. The point is that the pattern of Chinese elderly’s engagement with politics and public affairs is a fascinating topic that merits further attention.

In conclusion, *China's Grandmothers: Gender, Family, and Ageing from Late Qing to Twenty-First Century* offers a refreshing perspective on the ebb and flow of modern Chinese society by placing grandmothers and intergenerational relationships at the center of the story. Fusing the personal and the academic, Lary brings to light a world filled with warmth and affection, resilience and

interdependence. Full of insightful observations, fun details, and wit and wisdom, this book will make a great read for both general readers and specialists. It will also help generate interesting conversations in various class settings and stimulate exciting new research.

¹ Recent publications have started to address this imbalance, offering a more equitable and sympathetic view of the elderly in modern China. Some of the representative new scholarship includes, Gail Hershtatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Kristin Stapleton, *Fact in Fiction: 1920s China and Ba Jin's Family* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016); and Yue Du, *State and Family in China: Filial Piety and its Modern Reform* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

² In mainland China, the field of gerontological studies began to take shape in the early 1990s, with its earlier interests concentrated on studying aging-related policies and impacts in developed countries. As the population aged sixty and above reached the mark of 10% of the total Chinese population around the year 2000, mainland China officially became an "aging society." With official support, the field appears to have flourished since then, especially with the acceleration of China's perceived aging crisis around 2009. Research centers and thinktanks specializing in elderly studies were widely established in top academic institutions, which produced increasingly systematic empirical and theoretical studies on aging-related issues in mainland China. Renmin University's Du Peng and Dang Junwu and China Agricultural University's Ye Jingzhong and He Congzhi are among the pioneers and leaders of gerontological studies in mainland China. See, for instance, Du Peng, *Zhongguo renkou laolinghua guocheng yanjiu* (Beijing: Renmin daxue chubanshe, 1994); Dang Junwu, *Laoling shehui yinlun* (Beijing: Hualing chubanshe, 2004); Ye

Jingzhong and He Congzhi, *Jingmo xiyang: Zhongguo nongcun liushou laoren* (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2014). For English-language scholarship on the elderly in China, anthropologist Rose Keimig's fieldwork in Kunming, Yunan, is one of the most recent additions to this growing literature. See, Rose K. Keimig, *Growing Old in a New China: Transitions in Elder Care* (New Jersey: Rutgers University, 2021).

³ See, for instance, Chen Xiaonan, "Changpuhe laoren qing [Elderly love at Changpu River]," from *He moshengren shuohua* [Talk to strangers], season II, episode 4 (Tencent Video, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNqo1oF6RIk>.

⁴ Gao Yaojie, *Wo de fangai lu* [My experience on AIDS preventing] (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2011); Ai Xiaoming, *The Epic of the Central Plains* (2007); Kathleen McLaughlin, "The AIDS Granny In Exile," *BuzzFeed*, December 1, 2013, https://www.buzzfeed.com/kathleenmclaughlin/the-aids-granny-in-exile?utm_source=dynamic&utm_campaign=bfsharecopy.

⁵ Jinyan Zeng, "The Politics of Emotion in Grassroots Feminist Protests: A Case Study of Xiaoming Ai's Nude Breasts Photography Protest Online," *Gerogetown Journal of International Affairs* 15, 1 (2014): 41-52; and Jinyan Zeng and Chris Berry, "Documentary Film, Gender, and Activism in China: A Conversation with Ai Xiaoming," *Film Quarterly* 74, 1 (2020), 45-50.

⁶ Kevin O'Brien and Yanhua Deng, "Repression Backfires: Tactical Radicalization and Protest Spectacle in Rural China," 93 (2016): 457-470.

Response

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I am very grateful for this review, which has captured much of what I wanted to say in the book. I am also grateful for the criticism/suggestions, which I would love to see taken up in future research. *Less than favorable views of grandmothers* (p.4) I looked for these quite hard, but found very few, Sheng Cheng (1930s Sichuan) hated his , but he was bitterly critical of every member of his family! *Exhausted rural elderly* (p.8) I much appreciate this comment – and this is where I would most like to see more research.

Self-reflective voices (p.8) So few women were literate until quite recently that they could not write down their memories and reflections. This is where I would love to see some oral history.

Sweeping generalizations (p.9). I was aware of this tendency in my writing, but gave myself some leeway given my age and the length of time I have been in the field. This is self-serving, but it goes along with my desire to reach a wider audience than a strictly academic one.

Political issues (p.11) A barrier to political participation is the almost allergic reaction to politics one finds in many elderly people who went through the Cultural Revolution. This may comewith amnesia; today's grandmothers may have been Red Guards, who want to forget their childhood and youth. Victims of the Mao Era politics do write about their experiences, and I have mentioned several of them: Guo Xiaolu, Jian Ping, Rae Yang.